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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted of nurse educators in Canada involved in distance education to determine their perceptions of the unique role of teachers in the distance education teaching/learning process. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with 21 nurse educators with a range of 4 to 28 years teaching experience and 2 to 16 years experience with distance learning. All participants except for one used multiple modes of delivery, such as printed materials, audio and visual conferencing, education and media technologies, and electronic mail. Interviews focused on their definition of distance education, their role as a distance teacher, their philosophical beliefs about teaching, and what they saw as rewards and challenges. A questionnaire was also administered to collect demographic information. Results included the following: (1) while distance education was broadly defined, it was invariably seen as a means to increase educational opportunities; (2) respondents' philosophical beliefs were centered around the student/teacher relationship and the quality of educational materials; (3) respondents' tended to view themselves as content experts contributing to course development and organization and identified a key role in interacting with students to facilitate the learning process; (4) rewards of the process included the opportunity to experiment, as well as intrinsic rewards related to witnessing student growth; and (5) challenges included heavy workloads, colleagues' attitudes, and issues of credibility. (HAA)

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THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN DISTANCE EDUCATION:

THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

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Biographical Sketch

Sharon L. Moore, RN, PhD

Session 20: The Role of the Teacher in Distance Education: THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Moore is a nurse educator and chartered psychologist. She received her undergraduate degree from Anderson University in Indiana (1973), her Master's Degree from the University of Calgary in Educational Psychology (1984) and her Doctoral Degree from The University of Texas at Austin (1994).

She has been on faculty at Mount Royal College in Calgary, Alberta Canada since 1980 in the Centre for Health Studies and has been involved in teaching and development of the Interdisciplinary Gerontology Certificate Program and the Post Basic Mental Health Nursing Program (both of these are distance delivered programs). She currently is the Coordinator of the Post Basic Mental Health Nursing Program and in addition, has served as the College Research Officer for the past year and a half.

Research interests include research in distance education, and suicide and mental health issues related to the aging population.

The Role of the Teacher in Distance Education: THE TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

Is the philosophy of teaching at a distance different from traditional teaching? What is the role of the teacher in distance education? What are some of the challenges and rewards? Opportunities will be provided to dialogue about some of these important questions that are crucial to the teaching/learning process. In this session, the presenter will provide an overview of a study conducted by Moore & Gillis (1996) that looked at these questions through the eyes of the teacher. Participants will be invited to share their ideas about the implications for advancing the practice of teaching through distance education.

Introduction:

In recent years, there has been an increase in North America in the use of distance delivery for students pursuing educational programs, both at introductory and post-basic levels. This mode of delivery has been increasing, due in part to the changing nature of the student population. Distance delivery methods are seen as reducing some of the major barriers to accessing educational opportunities. While the use of distance has increased considerably, there is limited published literature that examines the role of the teacher in distance education. Questions arise related to the interpersonal dimensions of teaching, and the role and personal philosophy of the teacher.

The purpose of this descriptive, qualitative study was to develop an increased understanding of the role of the educator in distance education from an emic perspective. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of nurse educators from across Canada involved in teaching at a distance, to address the question "what is the role of the teacher in the teaching/learning process in distance education?"

While some concern has been expressed that there are many distance education programs that simply attempt to replicate the on-site classroom, our experience and research suggests that each of these environments needs to be treated differently. The majority of nursing educators interviewed for this study reported that they were challenged to think and act in new and different ways as they moved from traditional teaching environments to distance education.

Method:

In this study, a qualitative, descriptive methodology was used in which the two researchers interviewed nursing educators who were involved in teaching distance education courses and programs from across Canada. Inclusion criteria for the study were: ability to speak English, male or female, nursing educator who had taught by distance for a minimum of two semesters at a post

secondary institution.

Participants:

Twenty one nurse educators from across Canada were interviewed for the study. Nineteen of the participants were females and two were males. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 4-28, and years of teaching at a distance ranged from 2-16. The types of courses that these nurse educators were teaching included both undergraduate and graduate courses. All of the students in these courses were registered nurses.

Methods of Distance Used:

With the exception of one participant (who used audio teleconferencing which was structured similar to a traditional classroom), all participants described using multi modes of delivery: print based materials, audio and video conferencing, educational and media technologies, e-mail, workshops, seminars, student/teacher telephone conferences, audio visual materials, education consultants, and site coordinators. Combinations of several of these were used to unite the teacher and learner, to carry course content, and to provide mechanisms for interaction. The course materials incorporated interactive components into the design.

Data Generation:

Open ended interviews (using very loosely structured interview questions) were conducted with the participants, that focused on:

1. how they defined distance education
2. what they saw to be the role of the teacher in distance
3. what were their philosophical beliefs about teaching and learning at a distance
4. what they saw as rewards and challenges

The interviews lasted from forty five minutes to ninety minutes and were carried out either face-to-face, or at a distance by audio teleconferences. All interviews were audio taped to preserve the richness and completeness of the data. Also, a demographic data questionnaire was administered. The tapes were transcribed and the researchers independently did an initial coding of the data prior to collaborating about the analyses.

Results:

Distance Defined:

The participant responses reflected broad definitions of what distance education is. They defined it as "distance can be across the street or it can be around the world". Invariably, they saw distance as a means to increasing educational opportunities by overcoming certain types of barriers.

Philosophical Beliefs:

Responses with respect to philosophical beliefs centred around issues related to the student/teacher relationship, and the quality of educational materials. Further, the study participants described the type of students, what they bring to the educational exchange, and how that impacts the educational process.

Role of the Teacher:

The role of the teacher was conceptualized under two broad categories. First, teachers saw themselves as content experts contributing to the course development, organization of content, and "setting boundaries for learning". They described themselves as being a "bridge" between new knowledge and practice. They clearly articulated a change in their role as they moved from course design to course delivery.

Secondly, the participants identified a process role that had to do with their interactions with students. Much of their discussion centred around their roles in facilitating the learning process with students. Several of the participants reported that they felt they got to know many of their distance students better than their on-campus students. Clearly, there was a sense of how inextricably linked the educational process and students lives were when they were studying at a distance, and that this became part of the teacher role.

Rewards:

The majority of the participants reported positive experiences in distance teaching. Some of these were related to opportunities afforded by the delivery method for experimenting with alternate forms of delivery, and connecting with individuals across the country. Some described the rewards of distance teaching as more intrinsic than extrinsic. Many were inspired by the growth of students' self esteem, and the development of these students into critical and reflective practitioners.

Challenges:

Some of the major challenges that study participants raised related to heavy workloads, colleagues attitudes and credibility issues. Other challenges were issues of teacher feedback and satisfaction. A major challenge that all teachers expressed was related to how to deal with "problem" students.

Research Implications:

Some important considerations for future research have been raised as a result of this study.

- What promotes satisfaction among distance education teachers?
- What is the role of technology in distance education?
- There is a need to sort out assumptions around conditions under which learning takes place (graduate vs. undergraduate).
- What are the implications for transcultural offering of distance courses?
- What are the factors that influence completion and non completion?

Conclusions:

In conclusion, the results of this study confirm our belief that humanizing and connection between student and teacher are key components in understanding the role of the teacher in distance education. Assessment of the learner is critical in helping to identify the kinds of teacher behaviours that support and facilitate student learning. It is clear that being a good on campus teacher does not guarantee that someone will be a good distance teacher. There is a need for faculty development and support in preparing effective distance education teachers.

The results of this study contribute to a beginning database about teaching and learning in distance education. This study provides a foundation for further studies that examine the role of teaching and learning from the student's perspective, and the degree of satisfaction of both teacher and learner.

References:

Moore, S.L. & Gillis, A. (1996). The role of the teacher in teacher in distance education. Manuscript in progress. Mount Royal College, Calgary, Alberta and St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia.